



A Call for Reparative Investment in Black Bottom Paradise Valley

August 2023

Three years ago, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, American society was rocked by protests against police brutality and systemic racism. These protests sparked renewed conversations around how to materially improve the lives of Black Americans and their relationships with the police and justice system, as well as how to eliminate economic inequities that have marginalized Black Americans for centuries. Some cities like [St. Paul, Minn.](#), and [Oakland, Calif.](#), built on the momentum of that time by designing and launching large, meaningful investments that specifically addressed economic injustice and racial discrimination. Detroit's time for sweeping reparative investments in its Black residents and neighborhoods is long overdue.

Detroit, one of America's largest majority Black cities, stands at a crossroads. The city is enjoying an economic renaissance of sorts, yet this renaissance is not fully shared as racial inequities persist. As local and national attention turns to conversations around reparations, Detroiters, policymakers, and community and economic development practitioners should set their focus on making reparative investments that address historic and present-day economic and racial injustices faced by Black Detroiters

There is no place in Detroit better suited for a major reparative investment than historic Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. These culturally significant, majority Black neighborhoods were bulldozed and destroyed during the 1950s-60s and replaced by highways like I-375, new public and private housing, and green space. The residents who lived in these neighborhoods were displaced, losing not just homes and businesses, but a deep community which built up a neighborhood despite disinvestment and discrimination. The Reconnecting Communities Program, a federal initiative announced in 2022, will remove and replace I-375 and change not just the physical landscape, but has the potential to create and spark new development and investment opportunities. There is an opportunity to leverage this moment to address the cumulative historical harms done to these communities by using a restorative process that will lead to reparative investments. These investments can contribute to moving not just this community but the city toward a more economically equitable future.

Black Bottom and Paradise Valley

Black Bottom and Paradise Valley were situated just east of Downtown/Midtown Detroit and reached their height in the first half of the 20th century. Black Bottom was a primarily residential district stretching from Brush to St. Aubin between E. Jefferson and Gratiot/Vernor. Paradise Valley was a connected commercial and entertainment district located off of the northwest corner of Black Bottom, stretching from John R to Chrysler between Gratiot and Mack. These neighborhoods were anchored by Hastings Street, a main north/south throughfare, where many of the district's businesses were found.ⁱ Further, while they were not located within these boundaries, the manufacturing plants in and around nearby Milwaukee Junction (north of these boundaries) were crucial employers to the residents of these neighborhoods and key to attracting people to Detroit in the early 1900s.ⁱⁱ

The boundaries of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley vary amongst both scholars and residents. The economic and cultural impacts were also felt beyond these boundaries.



Black Bottom and Paradise Valley were primarily occupied by migrants to Detroit. Originally home to Native Americans, beginning in the 1700s, European immigrants came to these neighborhoods. But with the onset of the Great Migration in the 1920s, this shifted as the Black population in Detroit increased dramatically. Black Bottom and Paradise Valley saw an especially large increase in the Black population because they were some of the few neighborhoods where Black Detroiters were allowed to live due to discriminatory housing practices and policies like redlining and restrictive covenants.ⁱⁱⁱ These and other purposefully exclusive and discriminatory policies, along with a housing shortage and the neighborhood's status as primarily immigrant and Black neighborhoods, meant that Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods and residents were denied meaningful public investment and access to wealth building opportunities. This resulted in concentrated poverty, overcrowding, poor housing, and deteriorated infrastructure throughout the neighborhoods.^{iv}

Despite the challenging living conditions, Black Bottom and Paradise Valley were significant neighborhoods for much of Detroit's history, especially for Black life and culture during the first half of the 20th century. These neighborhoods were home to Black social institutions and more than 300 Black-owned businesses around their peak in the mid-1940s, including doctor's offices, drugstores, beauty salons, and restaurants.^v Beyond this, Paradise Valley was a vibrant and nationally renowned entertainment district.^{vi}



1543 E. Lafayette in 1949, which was located in what is now Lafayette Park.
Photo credit: Burton Historical Collection Detroit Public Library

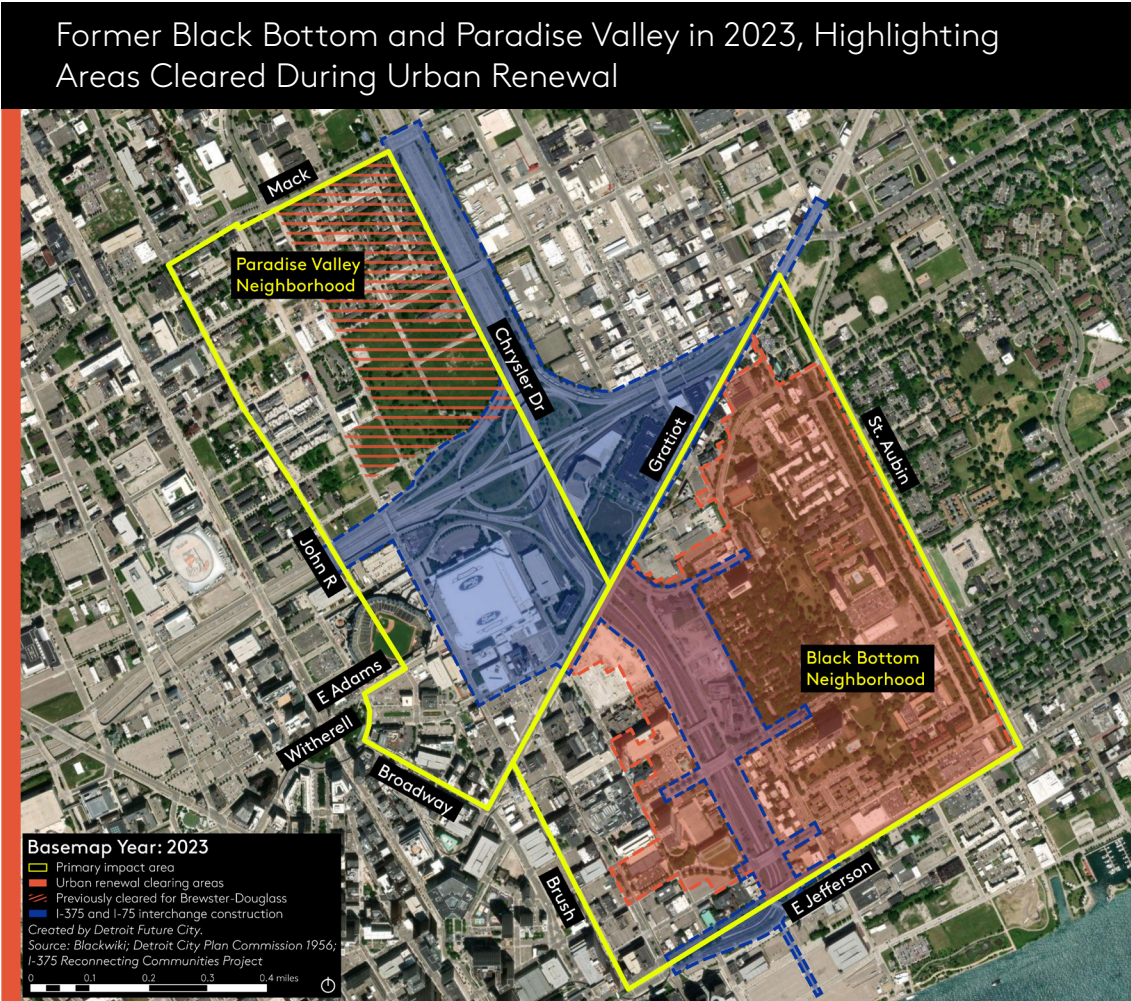


Paradise Valley in 1942.
Photo credit: William Vandivert/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock.

Urban Renewal in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley

The story of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, like many historic Black neighborhoods across the United States, took a turn in the mid-late 1940s. Along with key laws like the American Housing Act (1949) and Federal-Aid Highway Act (1956) which pumped millions into public housing and highway projects that supported migration from cities out to the suburbs, an attitude of “slum clearance” took hold of policy makers across American cities. The result of new federal dollars to fund slum clearance was that majority Black neighborhoods across the country experienced an influx of demolition, highway construction, and public housing projects that often meant the destruction of primarily Black neighborhoods. Black Bottom and Paradise Valley were no different.

In 1946, Detroit’s Mayor Edward Jeffries began the process of urban renewal by asking the city’s Common Council to approve the demolition of Black Bottom.^{vii} A variety of demolitions and public housing investments soon followed, and by the mid-1950s, more than 100 acres of Black Bottom were already gone.^{viii}



The 1950s also saw Mayor Albert Cobo decide to privatize the redevelopment of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, and those efforts were highlighted by the development of the Lafayette Pavilion, which helps to anchor the current day Lafayette Park neighborhood.^{ix} As Lafayette Park took shape, what remained of Black Bottom disappeared. Paradise Valley managed to survive for a few more years, but when the construction of I-375 began in 1959, the neighborhood was quickly slated for demolition.^x Today, landmarks such as Lafayette Park, Ford Field, and I-375 stand where Black Bottom and Paradise Valley once were. As land was acquired and housing demolished, many residents were displaced to other parts of the city and these once majority Black neighborhoods changed dramatically.

Urban renewal stopped in the 1970s, but its effects were widespread. While the estimates vary, the Detroit Commission on Community Relations calculated that 10,000 structures were demolished and 43,000 people (70% of whom were Black)¹ were displaced by urban renewal in Detroit.^{xi} The impact of policies on Detroit's neighborhoods did not end with urban renewal and continue to impact Black Detroiters today. The legacies of redlining, over taxation, and predatory lending, along with lack of access to mortgage lending and capital to grow and build a business, among others, have resulted in the disparities that can be seen today in terms of disparate rates of homeownership, entrepreneurship, and wealth. While the outcomes of these policies are not limited to Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, they continue to influence the deep inequities across racial and economic boundaries that exist today. Sweeping, reparative investments should be pursued as a way to bridge these gaps and right past wrongs.



(Left) Aerial view looking north on Hastings St. in 1959. (Right) Aerial view of I-75, north of I-375 interchange in 1961.
Photo credit: Detroit Historical Society

1. The demolition and population statistics look at the total impact of urban renewal across Detroit and are not limited to just Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.

Reparative Investment in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley

The Black Bottom and Paradise Valley communities hold a deep history of Black culture. The egregious acts of government and others physically dismantled the neighborhoods, forced displacement to other parts of the city, and caused the loss of Black wealth, culture, and community that had been built up there during the first half of the 1900s. As the demolition of I-375 sparks potential new investment and development opportunities, now is a critical time to take bold moves to advance economic equity by embracing a restorative process that centers community voice to produce reparative investments and outcomes that offset past inequities and the harms done in Black Bottom, Paradise Valley and adjacent neighborhoods.

A restorative process goes beyond traditional approaches because it prioritizes resident participation by shifting power from those making the investment to those in the community. Residents should be invited to actively participate in the design of investments in their community. This model must also utilize a reparative lens which includes a commitment to repair the harms of the past endured by members of the community who have been subject to unjust community and economic development efforts. In order to best execute a restorative process and properly shift power to residents, organizations should take intentional steps to ensure their own internal processes are both equitable and embody a culture of anti-racist practices to best support reparative investments that create opportunity for Black Detroiters.^{xii} Through this restorative process, resources can be strategically invested in ways that address a community's unique needs, build community power, and collaboratively create shared prosperity.

A reparative investment in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley means acknowledging and understanding the negative impact of urban renewal and other policies and actively designing reparative programs and investments that center the current and former residents impacted by these policies, both during the design and execution.

Restorative process: People affected by past harm participate in how future investments are made to produce reparative outcomes.

Reparative outcomes: Positive results, such as fair compensation, increased wealth, and proper acknowledgment, that arise from investments made through a restorative process in individuals and communities.

Reparations: The act of government entities and others who caused or benefited from past harms providing compensation, restitution, or redress, often in the form of financial or material assistance, to individuals, groups, or communities that have historically suffered from injustices, such as slavery, colonialism, or systemic discrimination.



Photo credit: Tafari Stevenson, Howard

“Making the American Dream an equitable reality demands the same U.S. government that denied wealth to Blacks restore that deferred wealth through reparations to their descendants in the form of individual cash payments in the amount that will close the Black-white racial wealth divide. Additionally, reparations should come in the form of wealth-building opportunities that address racial disparities in education, housing, and business ownership.”

Why We Need Reparations for Black Americans
Rashawn Ray, Senior Fellow - Governance Studies
Dr. Andre Perry, Senior Fellow - Brookings Metro

Reparative Investment in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley

To properly offset the destruction of these neighborhoods caused by urban renewal and the construction of I-375 and to generate and protect wealth for Black Detroiters, a reparative investment in historic Black Bottom and Paradise Valley should be made. Detroit Future City has developed an initial list of key components that would support reparative outcomes in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley:²

Emphasis on those displaced and their descendants by urban renewal as well as Black Detroiters currently living in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods.

Strategies to **increase homeownership among Black Detroiters** living in the neighborhoods.

Programs to **strengthen the housing stock** by supporting home repair for existing residents.

Ensuring Black developers have the investment and access to be at the forefront of development opportunities.

Support for the **development of a business district focused on Black owned enterprises** and the cultivation of Black entrepreneurs.

Implementation of **land use-based climate resilience solutions** to build the neighborhood's resistance to acute shocks caused by climate impacts.

It is important to note that there are community groups such as Black Bottom Archives, Detroit People's Platform, and others that are on the frontlines working to [document](#) the multi-generational harm done to Black Detroiters as a result of the destruction of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, and advocating for reparations for Black Detroiters to be part of the I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project.

Now is the time for all Detroiters, governmental agencies, investors, civic leaders and community and economic development practitioners to apply a restorative framework to their current and proposed policies and programs, leverage the lived experience of community members, and strive toward making reparative and transformational investments in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.

DFC would like to extend a deep appreciation to the local historians, community groups, and supporters of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley whose knowledge helped to inform and shape this brief.

2. These recommendations were compiled after reviewing census data of 25 tracts in and around the Black Bottom/Paradise Valley boundary area, interviews with community partners, and strategic discussions with project team members. Additional work should be done to ensure these recommendations are reflective of community needs and voice.

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